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ABSTRACT

This report reviews aggregate data for school districts in the Northwest region (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington), breaking down on-time high school completion data by percent Native American student enrollment. This focus on high school completion rather than dropout emphasizes student resiliency rather than failure. Findings indicate that where Indians are concentrated, on-time graduation rates decline. But in Alaska, Idaho, and Montana, graduation rates climb where Indians are a larger fraction of student population but not more than 80 percent. The two states with the largest urban populations, Oregon and Washington, show more consistent decline in graduation rates as the proportion of Indians in the student body increases. District achievement averages decline as the percent Indian enrollment increases beyond 20 percent, but districts with Indian enrollments under 20 percent report slightly higher achievement scores than districts where no Indians are enrolled. Data related to urban/rural location support the notion that Indians have lower graduation rates than non-Indians in the same size urban areas. The pattern for achievement scores indicates that urban and rural districts with higher Indian enrollments reported lower scores than those with lower Indian enrollments, but suburban areas with higher Indian enrollments reported slightly higher scores. Current data are suggestive for Indian students in districts with higher Indian enrollment, but individual-level data is necessary to draw conclusions about Indian students in districts where they are a small minority. The appendix is comprised of four graphs which present the data. Contains 19 references. (TD)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES BY NATIVE AMERICAN ENROLLMENT IN NORTHWEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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November 1995

Research and Development Program
for Indian Education
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BACKGROUND

High School Dropout Rates

The number of adults aged 25 and over who report having a high school diploma or its equivalent has risen steadily since the Census began asking about high school completion. Under "Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1991 and 1990" in *Current Population Report on Population Characteristics*, the Census Bureau indicates that about 78 percent of all adults aged 25 and over report having completed high school or its equivalent.

Why is it, then, that the concern over dropping out of high school without a diploma seems to grow each year in this country? Gerald Bracey, a research psychologist and education consultant living in the Washington, D.C. area, has made an annual study of progress in American education, and the "hoaxes and myths" that obscure public perception of this progress (Bracey 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994). Bracey argues that scholarly and media interest in deploring American education stem from a number of factors: (1) efforts to obtain federal and foundation support for education require documentation of high levels of need for this added support; (2) right-wing attacks on the liberal agenda to help the poor, in part through education, rather than forcing them to "take responsibility" for their plight; (3) mass media describes the educational scene in dire terms because bad news sells better than good news; and (4) xenophobic fear that developing nations threaten the American way of life in part because their schools are better. A recent report by Carson, et al., 1993, working at the Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico, similarly documents that " . . . on nearly every [educational] measure we found steady or slightly improving trends" (p. 259).

Behind this distortion of national perspective on dropout rates and other educational indicators, there are legitimate reasons for the widespread concern about how many young people are actually completing high school in the late twentieth century. The high school dropout is associated with a host of other urban ills that stubbornly resist a wide range of efforts at remediation. Areas where high school completion rates are low tend to be large urban and suburban districts, characterized by instability, poverty, racial discrimination, unemployment, and crime.

Concern with dropout rates also derives from discouragement with intervention strategies, while certain *prevention* programs have produced widely acknowledged successes. For example, the Head Start program has received widespread attention for its effectiveness in keeping students in school and constructively involved in the community as young adults. Educators increasingly look to prevention rather than intervention to work with students at risk.

Perhaps the main reason for focus on high school completion relates to the connection between education and work. Information and service work are replacing manufacture as the dominant and fastest-growing areas of the national and international economy.

Workers must be well-educated in order to qualify for higher-paying jobs, and to be able to respond better to a changing world of work. Adults can expect to work at many jobs during their lifetimes, and finding new work will be easier for those who can learn new skills more readily. Students must be trained as "life-long learners."

Because schools are increasingly seen as the cornerstone of the American economy, school effectiveness is coming to be judged not only by achievement test scores, but also in terms of human "output:" how many of the students who arrive at the schoolhouse door are successfully processed through to completion? Where historically, advanced schooling was not thought to be "for everybody," now earning a diploma is seen as a civic duty and a financial necessity for all.

Graduating ALL students is increasingly seen as a basic goal for an effective school (Rumberger and Thomas, 1995). While test scores can be used to judge effectiveness in turning out high-performing scholars, completion rates can be used to judge the school's effectiveness in delivering education to students at risk of failure. Together, the two indicators give a more balanced view of school effectiveness, since they get at different realms of administrative activity: quality of education delivered (curriculum) and proportion of students effectively served (outreach and counseling), as judged by high school completion. In the words of Rumberger and Thomas,

> Thus, a more complete picture of school effectiveness can be achieved by looking at both the achievement of students who remain in school and the achievement of students who do not. (p.9)

Summarizing, recent concern over high school completion stems from three basic causes:

1. Concern that dropouts may be less able to support themselves and contribute positively as individuals in society

2. Concern that as the formerly undeveloped nations of the world now move rapidly to develop their resources and enter worldwide markets, the competitiveness of the U.S. economy will increasingly be linked to how well-educated our workers are

3. A growing view that high school completion and attrition rates must be included with student achievement scores to judge a school's effectiveness

Reflecting these concerns, in 1990 the Bush Administration adopted 90 percent high school graduation as one of the Goals 2000 national educational goals. The inclusion of high school graduation as one of these goals acted to perpetuate lowering the dropout rate as a focus for educational improvement.

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High School Dropout Among American Indians

Most studies of high school dropout show that American Indians and Native Alaskans have one of the highest dropout rates of all ethnic groups in the United States (Swisher and Hoisch, 1992). For example, Swisher and Hoisch refer to the national study, *High School and Beyond* (1983), which reported that Indians have the highest dropout rate, at 29.2 percent. But because it only followed students from sophomore year, this study missed counting students who had dropped out earlier. The actual dropout rate would have been considerably higher.

Residential mobility has been an obstacle to high school completion among Native American students. Many Indian students move back and forth between schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and ordinary public and private schools. Mobility also interferes with calculating reliable dropout rates for Indian students. School systems have not established agreements for maintaining comparable records systems. Students counted as dropouts by the system left behind may actually go on to complete high school in another jurisdiction.

There is some evidence that Indian students who are limited to any one school may drop out more than students who take the opportunity to move to another school that serves them better (Owens and Bass, 1969). But other evidence indicates that Indian students often transfer out of public schools to attend BIA schools as a last resort, when they have met with failure in the public schools (Latham, 1985). Dropout rates from BIA schools may appear high primarily because Indian students return to the reservation in a last, unsuccessful attempt to salvage efforts toward a high school diploma or transfer to other urban settings, knowing that there will always be a place for them in BIA schools if nothing else works.

Qualitative efforts to understand dropout/completion among Indian high school students point to the resiliency of Indian youth in the face of considerable adversity (Wax, 1967; Bowker, 1993). Indian youngsters who live on reservations are faced with hours of bus travel to get to school each day for a period of years in order to graduate from high school. In urban and suburban school districts, Indians face ethnic prejudices and cultural challenges from the white majority. Whether on the reservation or residing in urban settings, the Indian poverty rate exceeds that among whites. Students who experience these conditions and yet complete high school must demonstrate remarkable resiliency.

Social Problems and Sources of Resiliency Among Indians

In recent years, prevention activities have come to be guided by a more positive approach. Rather than emphasizing the problems that youth face such as delinquency or school failure, the new approach emphasizes the resiliency that allows most individuals to overcome difficulties in their lives and eventually prosper (Benard, 1991; Linquanti, 1992), even among groups with a relatively high incidence of failure. Rather than seeing the community as generating problems, the resiliency approach searches to mobilize the

assets that any community offers its people (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Rather than touting the latest program model, advocates of the new approach call for broad, communitywide collaborations aimed at removing bureaucratic barriers to a wide variety of human services (Melaville and Blank, 1991; Schorr, 1988).

As described above, much has been written about the high American Indian dropout rate. Indian students experience special challenges connected with a high poverty rate, frequent alcohol abuse, and cultural discontinuity as Indians try to establish themselves in the dominant white culture while staying connected to their Native heritage. But in a recent large-scale study of 991 Indian girls and the issue of high school completion, Bowker (1993) found distinctive forms of Indian resiliency as well.

Bowker documented that the high poverty rate among Indians threatens high school completion by disrupting the stable home environment that students need in order to address their homework and get support in coping with their problems. But the most important source of resiliency also came from the family in the form of either emotional or financial/logistical help with school. Despite the difficulty that many Indians have had for generations in finishing school, even the less-educated parents were likely to advocate for their children working hard to earn a diploma. Similarly, continuous relationship with other supportive caregivers made a big difference in keeping girls involved in school. When support at home was hard to come by, many Indian girls benefited from an inspiring relative, most often an aunt or grandmother, or from a wise and helpful teacher. A strong sense of spirituality, in the sense of internal "character," helped many students graduate despite obstacles.

Some of the Bowker findings contradict conventional wisdom about American Indian students. The issues of language usage and cultural Indian identity were related in interesting and contradictory ways. The ability to speak a Native language usually indicates a stronger connection with Indian culture and identity. Bowker found that girls who spoke Native languages fluently did *not* drop out of school more frequently than those who were monolingual English speakers, even though only about 10 percent of girls she interviewed spoke a Native language. In fact, it appeared that young women who strongly identified with *either* the Indian culture *or* the white culture did better than those who had no strong ethnic identity (p. 182). But lack of skill with standard English in the early grades did offer an obstacle to completing school. Students with a restricted English vocabulary were more likely to fail academically.

A majority of young women Bowker studied had experienced racism during adolescence. Discriminatory language and treatment in school was directly linked to dropping out of school, by creating a high level of frustration, especially if teachers themselves were guilty of such treatment. But fear of "acting white" also contributed to girls' lack of achievement in school. In an effort to find the best educational environment, many Indian students transferred among reservation and nonreservation school districts. Such transferring from one school to another may also have increased the likelihood of Indian girls deciding to leave school before graduation (p. 261).

More research is needed that looks at high school completion rates in cohorts of children followed at least from the point of eighth grade completion, and optimally from earlier years. Particularly among residentially mobile Indian students, studies that look at just one school district are limited in what they can reveal about Indian dropout rates. Indian students take advantage of the existence of reservation schools as well as various other public schools, looking for the best programs to help them address their distinctive needs and eventually earn a diploma. Indian students may simply "stop out" for a while, re-enter school, and drop out again. Eventually, finding themselves too old to return to high school, many Indians obtain a GED at post-secondary schools, reservation colleges, or other institutions of higher education. What is needed is a broader view of the Indian student trajectory through high school, analyzing data from a broader geographical area and over a longer period of time.

Following Cohorts of Students Over Time and Across Jurisdictions

High school dropout/completion research has broadened the way educators now look at dropping out of school. The National Center for Education Statistics (1990) clarifies that there are at least three common types of dropout rates:

1. Status rate: the proportion of the population who have not completed high school or are not enrolled in school at any one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out

2. Cohort rate: what happens to a single group (or cohort) of students over a longer period of time

3. Event rate: the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school (event rates are often called "annual rates")

Although it is a valuable indicator of school effectiveness in serving students at risk, the dropout rate at any one time point is only one aspect of the larger picture that might more usefully be labeled high school completion. Cohort analysis offers a bigger picture, as demonstrated in a recent study in the Baltimore, Maryland urban school system with over 100,000 students enrolled (Edirisooriya and Howe, 1995). The study tracked two cohorts of 8th graders over a period of years. The earlier cohort of 8,110 students became the graduating class of 1994. This cohort approach yielded some surprising results. At the end of twelfth grade, the Native American dropout rate was about 36 percent, a rate next to the *lowest* of the ethnic groups tracked. Asian students had the lowest dropout rate at 29 percent, while Hispanic students had the highest rate at 48 percent.

The Baltimore study documents the very high impact of residential mobility on high school completion rates. Clearly, high school completion is a process nowadays much complicated by tremendous student mobility from school district to school district. Many students at risk seek to make a fresh start at a new school, and may not facilitate the

transfer of records. Similarly, students who transfer in good standing may in fact drop out later. So-called "dropouts" may in fact enroll at other schools and complete high school elsewhere, even in the absence of requests for records by the new schools. Many of these students may attend tribal or other colleges and earn a GED while pursuing college credits.

Many studies of high school completion or dropout rates are confined to particular locations, and as such include relatively few Indians. The several large national studies of dropout reviewed by Swisher and Hoisch in 1992 also included few American Indians due to sampling strategies. The national studies they reviewed failed to over-sample Indians, who comprise less than 1 percent of the general population. More research is needed that does look at Indian populations specifically, following individuals in a cohort from 8th grade on.

METHODOLOGY

This study reviews aggregate data for Northwest school districts, breaking high school completion data down by percent Native American student enrollment. This aggregate strategy offers a look at a wide encugh geographical area that the number of Indian students surveyed can support more reliable conclusions about how well Indian students are doing at completing high school. Looking at high school completion rather than dropout is a simple but meaningful way to emphasize student resiliency rather than failure. Aggregate data analysis is subject to some limitations, discussed below.

Data Used To Analyze Northwest High School Completion Rates

The Northwest region of the United States (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington) contains a number of Indian reservations and an Indian population larger than other regions of the U.S. *Individual-level* dropout or high school completion data are unavailable in comparable school district records across the United States. However, *aggregate-level* data do exist for all school districts, collected by the U.S. Department of Education in a Common Core of Data. In addition, Census data have been obtained in aggregated form for school districts. These aggregate data cannot address questions of individual rates of completion. But they do offer insights into school district patterns of high school completion, ethnic enrollment, and school district and community attributes.

The following report is based on a composite database that includes:

1. High school graduation in 1991 of fall 1990 12th graders, ethnic composition of the students enrolled during 1990-91, and urban/rural location data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) collected by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education. Graduation rate is calculated as the number of 12th grade students graduating in 1991 compared to the number of students who entered 12th grade in the previous fall of 1990.

2. Poverty data collected by the 1990 Census and reported in aggregate form by school district.

3. Achievement data expressed as mean weighted averages of test results reported by school districts to all five Northwest state departments of education in 1992-93, (1993-94 for Oregon). Achievement test data were converted from normal curve equivalent (standard) scores to percentile scores.

The remaining analysis focuses on aggregate high school completion and other rates at the 744 school districts that include high schools in the Northwest region. Districts serving only K-8 were excluded. Data for individuals are not reported here. Graduation, achievement scores, ethnic breakdown, and all other data are reported for school districts rather than individuals. Graduation rates and GED certificates earned beyond 12th grade in high school are also not reported. Graduation rates apply only to 12th -grade students who graduated on time from high school, at the end of 12th grade.

Analysis of aggregate data necessarily leaves some questions unanswered. Data at the school district level reveals more about American Indian students living on reservations than about Indian students living in larger urban areas because on or near federal reservations, school district rates will reflect a very predominantly Indian student body. But in large urban and suburban areas where Indians make up only a small minority of the student body, school district statistics will necessarily reflect the dominant majority ethnic groups. In Northwestern cities, these majorities are most likely white. Where Indians make up sizeable minorities, the Indian influence on district rates will lie somewhere between the urban and rural/reservation extremes.

FINDINGS

Brief Profile of Native Americans in the Northwest

Northwest districts with high Indian enrollments tend to be districts with high poverty. Districts with high Indian enrollment also tend to report relatively less education among adult residents. The percent of families falling within poverty guidelines for the 1990 Census is 21 percent for districts with no Indian enrollment, and 38 percent for districts with 80 percent or more Indian enrollment. In areas with 80 percent or greater Indian enrollment, 34 percent of adults reported not having earned high school diplomas. In the rest of the Northwest region, about 17 percent of adults report not having earned diplomas.

In all 1,261 Northwestern region school districts, Native Americans make up a relatively small percentage of total enrollments: 4 percent of the total public school enrollment in the region, and 24 percent of the total minority enrollment. About 68 percent of the region's school districts report enrolling some Indian students. The greatest number, about half, of these students attend schools where they comprise a tiny minority, fewer

than 10 percent Indian enrollment. The greater part of the remaining half of Indian students attend just 5 percent of the region's public school districts; these 67 school districts enroll 32 percent of all Indian students in the region. So Indian students are divided largely between schools where they may have few Indian classmates, and schools where almost everyone else is Indian (mostly BIA schools).

On-Time Graduation Rates for Northwest Indians

The on-time graduation rates of 1991 12th graders are displayed in bar-chart format in the appendix for the entire Northwest region, and then for each of the five states in the region (Graphs 1 through 6), breaking school districts by percent Native American enrollment. (Some district categories report more graduates than there were 12th graders enrolled in the fall because students transferred into 12th grade after the fall student count occurred, and subsequently graduated from high school.)

On-Time Graduation by Native American Percent of District Enrollment

The regional data in Graph 1 indicate that Indian graduation rates decline with increasing Indian enrollment in the district. However, a look at the graphs for the five individual states shows variation in this pattern. Alaska, Idaho, and Montana manifest an *interrupted* decline in graduation rates as the proportion of Indians in the student body increases. Districts with intermediate-size minority Indian enrollment reported a higher proportion of graduates than districts where Indians comprised smaller minorities.

These aggregate data appear to support the trend often reported in the dropout literature reviewed above, that American Indians have very high dropout rates. Where Indians are concentrated, on-time graduation rates decline. But at least in some places (Alaska, Idaho, and Montana), graduations actually climb where Indians are a *larger* fraction but not more than 80 percent. These simple aggregate data do not tell whether it is something about these particular school districts or about the experience of Indians being a larger ethnic group within a diverse whole that accounts for these higher graduation rates. (Idaho's departure from this pattern may be due to the small number of school districts in the largest size category, only two districts, and therefore should perhaps be disregarded.) The two states with the largest urban populations, Oregon and Washington, appear to offer a less supportive environment for high school graduation than the other three, more rural states. Oregon and Washington show more consistent decline in graduation rates as the proportion of Indians in the student body increases. Further, this pattern of decline in graduation with Indian enrollment is much more pronounced in Washington, where the urban area in question, Seattle, is three times the size of Oregon's urban area around Portland. In the other three, more rural states, the graduation rate does not fall below 80 percent for any of the district groupings according to Indian enrollment size. But in Washington, the 12th grade graduation rate for districts with 80 percent or more Indian enrollment falls to 50 percent.

Achievement Scores by Northwest Indian Enrollment

Students who drop out of high school have often struggled academically. To form an idea of other educational outcomes associated with high school graduation, achievement test scores (expressed in percentiles) are displayed broken down by percent Native American enrollment in Graph 2. The achievement averages for the region as a whole decline as the percent Indian enrollment increases beyond 20 percent. So graduation rates and achievement scores vary together, and they both decline with rising Indian enrollment.

Achievement by District Native American Percent of District Enrollment

As with graduation rates, achievement rates within each of the five states of the Northwest region display some variation from the pattern for all five taken at once. Generally, districts that report small Indian minorities also report slightly higher achievement scores than districts where no Indians at all are enrolled. This differential is largest in the state of Washington, and appears to reflect higher achievement in urban areas versus isolated all-white communities.

On-Time Graduation and Achievement in Urban/Rural Location

Data related to the association of urban/rural location with on-time graduation rates and achievement percentile scores are presented in Graphs 3 and 4. Percent of 12th grade students graduating on time and achievement test percentile means are displayed for districts with differing levels of Indian student enrollment.

On-time graduation for urban districts is 81 percent for 1991, a slightly lower graduation rate than for most other suburban, town, or rural districts. In each of the other urban/rural size categories, graduation rate declines with increasing Indian enrollment. However, most of these differences are small, between 80 percent and 87 percent. The biggest differences are between districts with no Indian enrollment at all and those with small Indian enrollments. This would seem to support the notion that Indian 12th graders have lower graduation rates than non-Indian youth in the same size urban areas.

The pattern for achievement scores for towns and rural areas repeats the same general pattern of graduation rates. The districts with higher Indian enrollments reported lower achievement scores. But for suburban areas, districts with higher Indian enrollments reported slightly higher achievement scores, at the 53rd versus the 50th percentile.

Implications

A preponderance of the literature on high school completion among Native Americans indicates that Indian youth have one of the highest, if not the highest, dropout rate of the ethnic groups commonly followed in American educational research (Native American, White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic). But there are exceptions to this trend. A recent

cohort study from Baltimore, Maryland reports that proportionately more Indian students in the class of 1994 remained in school than any other ethnic group except Asian students. Clearly, there is variation in high school completion rates reported for Indian youth.

A look at high school completion and academic achievement scores in the Northwest (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington), using aggregate data from government sources, tends to support the literature documenting high Native American dropout rates, particularly for smaller school districts. Districts that reported enrolling higher percentages of Indian students also reported lower high school completion and achievement rates.

The aggregate data set includes data that suggest reasons for lower Indian student graduation and achievement. The school districts that reported enrolling high proportions of Indian students were characterized by a higher proportion of the community residing in poverty, and a lower average level of adult education in the community. Although the Bowker study (1993) indicates that adults with lower education still encourage their children to finish school, their own example may be more powerful than their encouragement to do otherwise.

However, fully half of the region's Indian students attend schools with only 10 percent or lower Indian enrollment. Aggregate completion and achievement rates for these districts tell less about Indian student high school completion and achievement than do aggregate data for districts where Indians are more numerous. Indian student performance where Indians comprise a minority is statistically dominated by the performance of the majority group students, who are mostly White in the Northwest region.

Although the current data are suggestive for Indian students living in districts with higher Indian enrollment, a more detailed analysis using individual-level data is necessary to draw firm conclusions about the performance of Indian students living in districts where Indian students are a small minority. Indian minority districts include the large, urban school districts where Indian students may feel socially isolated from a supportive cultural community. It may well be that the performance of these urban Indian students is actually *lower* in terms of high school completion and achievement tests than the performance of Indian students in other districts where Indians form a larger minority or the majority. The aggregate data actually suggests the opposite, and may therefore be misleading.
Until individual-level data can be collected and analyzed from a complete range of school districts, it is risky to conclude that the performance of Indian students who attend schools as a minority truly exceeds the performance of Indian students who attend majority Indian schools. Further research employing individual-level data is needed.

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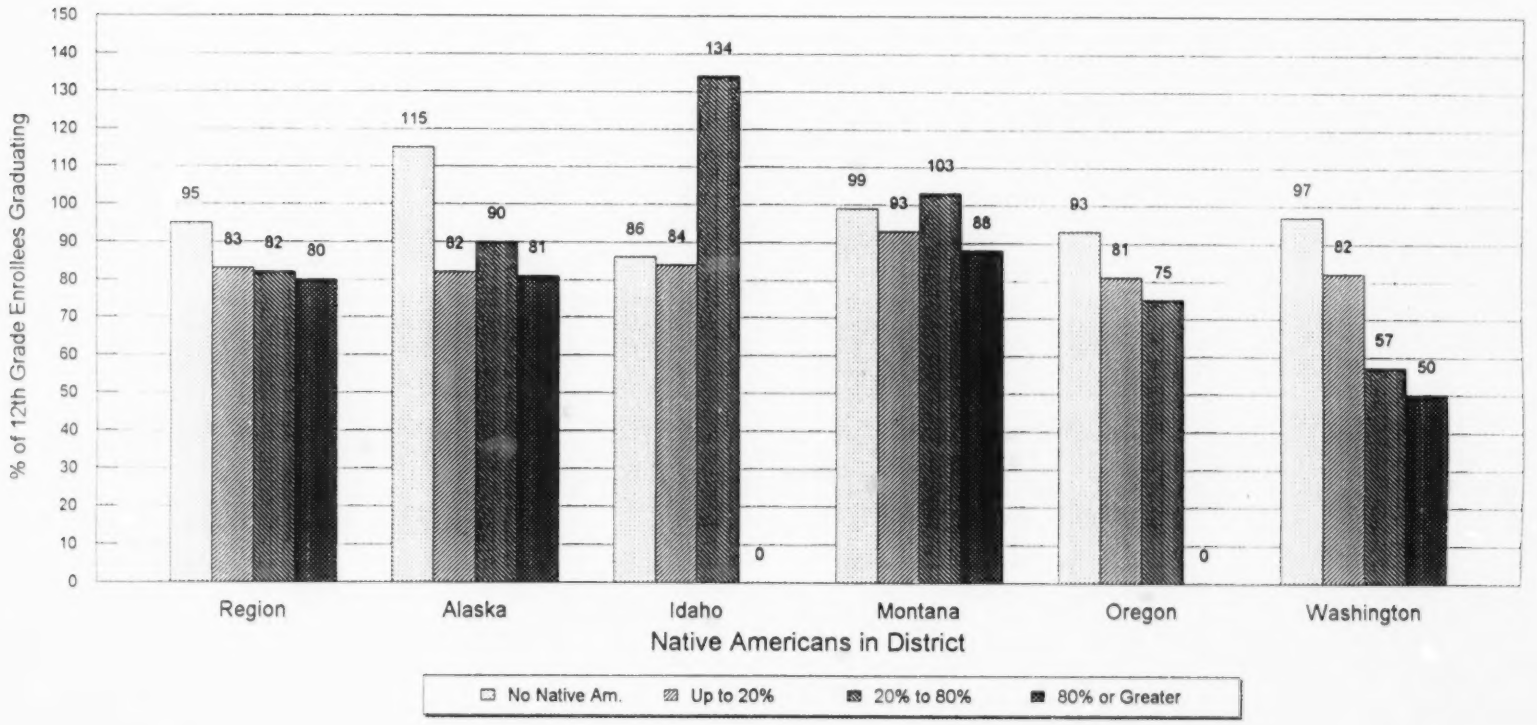
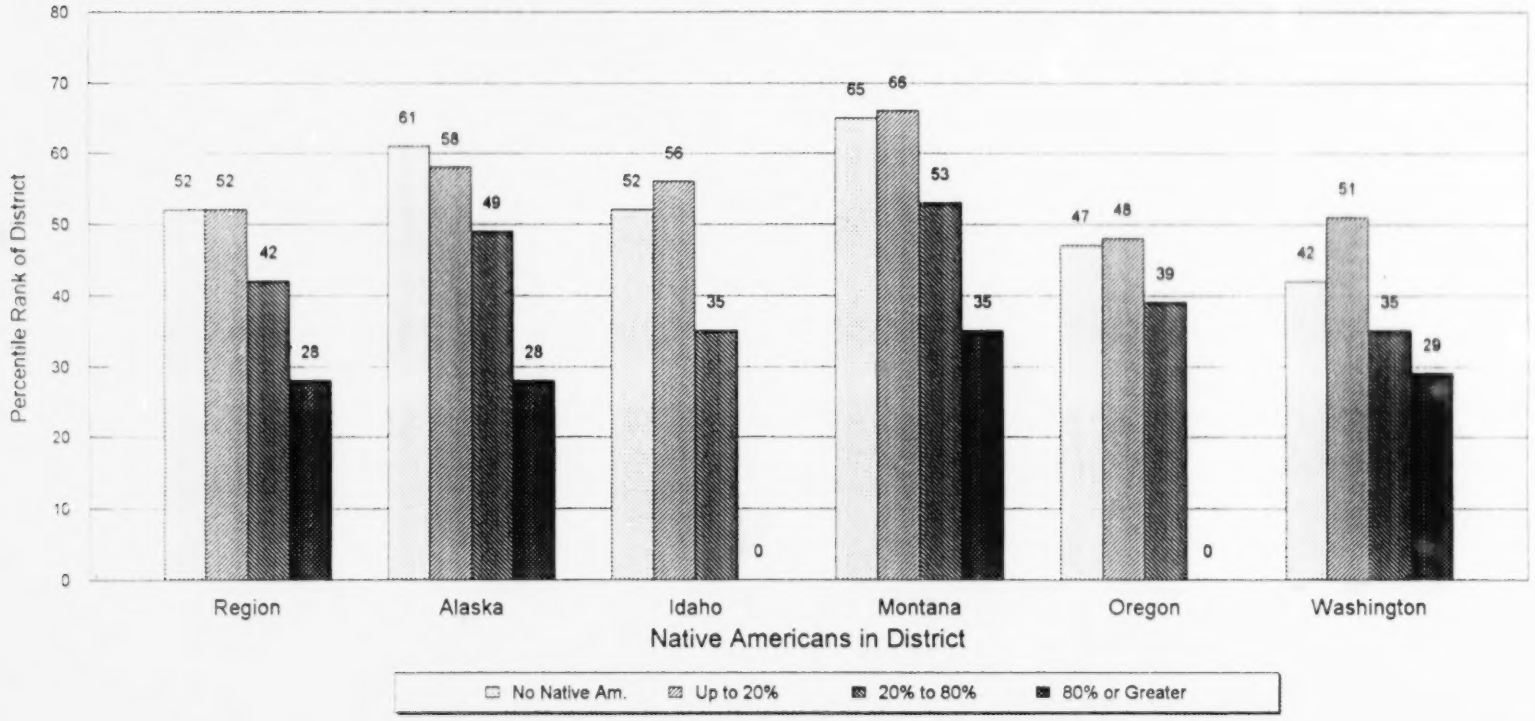
APPENDIX

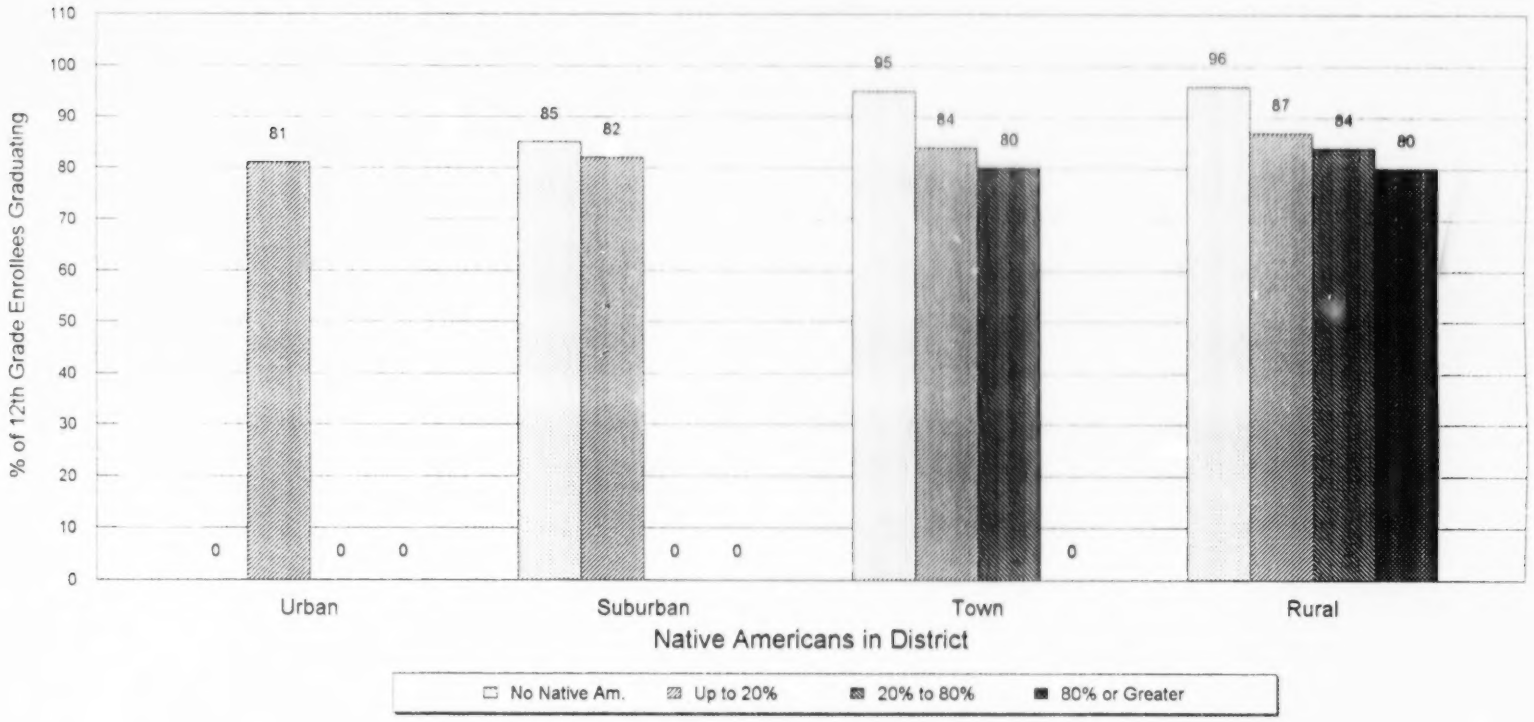
On Time Graduation by Native American Percent of District Enrollment
GRAPH 1



Achievement by District Native American Percent of District Enrollment
GRAPH 2



On Time Graduation by Native American Percent of District Enrollment by Urbanization
GRAPH 3



Achievement by District Native American Percent of District Enrollment by Urbanization
GRAPH 4